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ABSTRACT

With encouragement from IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) and support from the government, over 150 mobile libraries have been established in Vietnam and have been in active operation for the last 10 years. Various models of mobile libraries suited to different areas have been identified, such as "Libraries on Cultural boats," "Book bags of border guards," and "Bookcases of Commune Cultural Post Offices." The role played by the government in supporting mobile libraries has been a very positive experience; the government has provided support equivalent to 33.2 million U.S. dollars for 400 district libraries and 1,100 school libraries for the last 7 years. Mobile libraries have been recognized as the most suitable and effective model in realizing the equality to enjoy culture and information in poor regions. The government advocates continuing to develop mobile libraries as a strategic measure to improve the cultural life of the population and to carry out the Declaration of UNESCO, particularly the guidance from IFLA related to libraries as gateways to an enlightened world. The Vietnamese government has promulgated the Ordinance on Libraries and approved the support program for district libraries and school libraries in the 2001-2005 plan. This is a solid basis for mobile libraries to develop and to improve life. (MES)

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## Mobile libraries in Vietnam in 21st century

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### *Abstract:*

*Vietnam is a small country in Southeast Asia, two thirds of the area are mountains, the population is 78 million, but the contribution of population is uneven, Vietnam's economy is ranking among the poorest counties. The Vietnamese Government has made much endeavour, however, as the result of the economic and geographical difficulties, millions of people in mountainous and farmost areas have not had an access to books and newspapers enjoyment.*

*With the encouragement from IFLA and the support from the Government, over 150 mobile libraries have been established and in active operation for the last 10 years. Various models of mobile libraries suited to different areas have been identified such as "Libraries on Cultural boats, Book bags of border guards, Bookcases of Commune Cultural Post offices" etc. The role played by the Government in supporting mobile libraries is a very good experience (the Government has provided the support of 427 billion VND, equivalent to 33,2 million USD for 400 district libraries and 1,100 school libraries for the last 7 years). Mobile libraries have been recognized as the most suitable and effective model in realizing the equality to enjoy culture and information in the poor regions.*

*In the 21st century, with the development as it is now, 10-15 years later Vietnam will still face difficulties, it will not be easy at all to overcome the poverty and backwardness. The difference of cultural enjoyment among various regions will be existing. This explains as to why the Government advocates to continue developing mobile libraries. This is a strategic measure to improve the cultural life for the population, to carry out well the Declaration of UNESCO, particularly, the guidance from IFLA "Libraries as Gateways to an Enlightened World... Books for All. All for Books..."*

*The Vietnamese Government has just promulgated the Ordinance on Library and approved the support programme for District libraries and School libraries in the 2001-2005 plan. This is a solid basis for mobile libraries to develop, "Delivering Lifelong Learning Access Across Space and Time", to create might to improve life.*

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**1/Brief outline on Vietnam - the country and the people**

* The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is located on the Indochinese Peninsular, near the centre of the Southeast Asia. Vietnam has its mainland borderline of 4,510 km. It is bordering China in the North, Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Kingdom of Cambodia in the West and overlooking the Pacific Ocean in the East and in the South.

On the map, Vietnam's mainland has an S-shape. The mainland extends from the northernmost point at latitude 23°23' north to the southernmost point at latitude 8°27' south, covering 1,650 km (as the crow flies). Vietnam is in the tropical monsoon, sunny and rainy climate.

Vietnam covers an area of 330,991 square kilometers of mainland and approximately 1,000,000 square kms of coastline.

Vietnam has a variety of topographical types, and it is a country of numerous mountains, dense rivers, plateaus, plains and coastline.

Vietnam's mountains and hills account for two thirds of its territory. Mountains are majorly concentrating in 13 northern provinces.

There are as many as 2860 large and small rivers on the territory of Vietnam. The Cuu long river (Mekong) is the largest with the area of over 4,900 square kilometers, including 13 provinces, cities in the south of the country. Annually, in rainy season, these areas are overflowed, resulting in farmost areas. Overland transportation in rainy season is quite difficult.

* By 1999, the population of Vietnam is estimated at about 78,000,000, ranking the 12$^{th}$ in terms of population in the world.

The population of Vietnam is unevenly distributed among different regions of the country. Plains account for only one fourths of the natural areas but three fourths of the country's population are gathered in plains. The population density in the Red river delta in the north is 1,142 people/square kilometer, in the Cuulong delta in the south is 406 people/square kilometer. Meanwhile mountainous and midland regions account for only 112 people/square kilometer, plateaus account for merely 56 people/ square kilometer.

There are 54 races living on the territory of Vietnam.

There are 61 provinces, cities, 609 districts (129 districts in the mountainous area); 10,331 communes (1,941 communes in the mountainous area).

At present, approximately 80% of the Vietnam's population are living by involving in agriculture, forestry and fishery in rural, mountainous areas. Lives of farmers have been improved; however, life is still difficult. On the average, annual income is under 400 USD a head. Vietnam is accounted among one of the poorest countries in the world.

**2/ Culture**

Vietnam has the time-honoured culture full of specific features and deep national identity.

In 2000, Vietnam was recognized as a country that has completed the Programme on Primary General Education and Anti-illiteracy by UNESCO.

Along with education, Vietnam's culture has made tremendous progress. The Vietnamese government has advocated to develop the culture and the economy at the same time. The Government has defined: " Culture is the spiritual foundation of the society, the aim and impetus for the socioeconomic development". On the way to integrate into the world community, Vietnam is persistent to follow the direction to build up an advance culture full of national identity. The improvement of cultural life for people in rural, mountainous areas, particularly in highland, farmost areas is one of the top important tasks.

In the culture of broad range, "Reading culture" Library is a spearhead. Over recent years, the Vietnamese Government has been well aware of the importance and great effects of library activities on social life. Librarianship of Vietnam has made progress in both quantity and quality. At present, 4 library systems with over 20,000 libraries, bookcases in operation through out the nation comprise:

- Education library system:
  - 250 academic libraries
  - 13,500 school libraries

- Military library system: over 1000 libraries and bookcases

- Library system in research institutes, scientific institutes and information centres includes 300 libraries.

- Public library system:
  - The National Library
  - 61 provincial libraries
  - 540 district libraries
  - 7,500 libraries and bookcases in communes and villages

To fulfill the job of enhancing cultural life for people in rural, mountainous areas, rural library system and bookcases have vigorously developed, been diversified, suited to geographical, economic, cultural features of respective areas. Typical models are:

- Commune libraries
- Commune libraries in combination with schools
- Pagoda libraries
- Rong house libraries
- Libraries on Cultural boats
- Bookcases of Frontier posts
- Libraries of Cultural Villages
- Law Bookcases of communes
- Libraries of Commune Cultural Post offices

Bookcases, reading rooms in the Commune Cultural Post offices are models of high efficiency; this kind of service has been in operation for the last 3 years. This is a combination between economic activities and cultural activities of Culture and Post office. Up to now, 4,500 Commune Cultural Post offices have been established in approximately 50% communes of the whole country. Every Commune Cultural Post office has bookcases and reading rooms to serve farmers free of charge.

As a result of the above efforts, annually, there are over 15 million batches of farmers coming to enjoy books and other materials, search information in the library system, rural and mountainous bookcases. However, the capacity of meeting farmers' demands for reading is less than satisfactory. Newly published materials are not frequently acquired. The budget for maintaining these libraries, bookcases comes from the contribution by the public, so it is not stable. Approximately 40% communes have not established

libraries or bookcases. Tens of millions of people have not had an access to materials and information enjoyment. Meanwhile, provincial and district libraries have abundant capability to serve reading requirements.

This explains as to why mobile library services in Vietnam have been established.

**3/ Mobile libraries**

- Targets: Deliver books, newspapers from provincial, district libraries to rural, mountainous areas to serve people living in places where there is no library or to support poor libraries that are unable to provide people with reading services.

- Principles: Diversify different forms of mobile libraries to match with geographical and population features and financial abilities of respective areas and district libraries.

Up to now, 150 mobile libraries have been established and operated in the major following forms:

Mountainous areas: Mobile libraries are organized in each district, focussing on districts in highland areas. Mobile libraries are combined with literature and art group and mobile information group to be a synthetic cultural group. This group makes monthly trips to highland communes to serve people. Means of transport for this mobile services are minibuses, motorbikes, horses, bicycles, and on foot...

In the border areas, the recipients of books from mobile libraries are bookcases of frontier posts. Border guards will shoulder rucksacks and bags of books to serve villagers.

Plain, coastal areas: Mobile libraries on minibuses and motorbikes are conducted, priority is given to communes far from the centres. Books are delivered to islands for services in some coastal provinces. Some of commune cultural post-offices in these areas have become recipients and distributors of mobile libraries' materials to the public.

Cuulong Delta areas: Mobile libraries are organized on culture boats. Periodically, every month culture library boats recruit along rivers and make pauses at arranged stops to provide the public with reading, book loan services, performances of art and literature, film shows.

In short, over recent years, thanks to the development of mobile library services, a great number of people in mountainous, farmost areas have had the equality of enjoying culture, reading materials, receiving information, enhancing knowledge to improve life. Mobile libraries have virtually become messengers to bring knowledge to the public.

**4/ Support from the Government to facilitate mobile libraries to develop**

Each locality has it own geographical features, population and economy, so Vietnam has advocated to organize mobile libraries at district level as the key force to share collection with mobile libraries. Much support will be provided to mobile libraries if district libraries are powerful, having copious collection.

Based on the facts of districts libraries, particularly district libraries in highland areas, for the last 7 years (1994-2000), the Vietnamese Government has been carrying out without delay the programme on support for district libraries valued at 427 billion VND, equivalent to 33,2 million USD. The contents of the programme are as follows:

- Book support programme for 400 district libraries with total value of 17 billion VND, equivalent to 1,5 million USD

- Construction programme of 30 district library buildings in extremely difficult regions valued at 8 billion VND, equivalent to 600,000 USD
- Book support programme for 11,000 school libraries valued at 50 billion VND, equivalent to 4 million USD
- Programme on the establishment of 11,000 bookcases on Law valued at 52 billion VND, equivalent to 4,1 million USD
- Construction programme of 5,000 Commune Culture Post-offices valued at 300 billion VND, equivalent to 23,000,000 USD.

While the country is still poor, the support for library activities from the Government in recent years is of great value. This is one of the important factors, deciding the existence and development of mobile libraries in Vietnam.

The Government has approved the programme to continue supporting books, facilities for district library system and school library system in the 2001-2005 plan

**5/ Vietnam mobile libraries in the 21st century**

Vietnam advocates to continue developing the model of mobile libraries and improving the quality of mobile library services

Bases of this orientation are:

- The outcomes of practical activities for the last several years have themselves affirmed that mobile library is a suitable, economic model in improving cultural life for the population in mountainous, farmost areas

With the restricted capability of developing the country's economy, Vietnam should continue maintaining and strongly developing the model of mobile libraries for the first 10-15 years of this new Millennium at least

- Along with the modernization of Central library system and Provincial library system, the promotion of developing mobile libraries is a right combination between modern libraries and traditional libraries, guaranteeing the access to books and newspapers of the entire population

- Mobile libraries identity with the spirit of 1994 UNESCO Declaration: "Public libraries provide an access to the knowledge at basic level, guaranteeing fundamental conditions for continuous study, self-decision and for cultural development of individuals and communities"

This Declaration shows the belief of UNESCO in public libraries as active forces having influence on popularizing education, culture and information, as well as the most important factor to help solidify peace and spiritual life in mind of males and females

- Mobile library is a basis to realize the guideline of IFLA "Books for all. All for books", providing the population of different areas with good conditions to enjoy the equality to search information and read books, newspapers. Libraries deserve the status as IFLA has affirmed: " Libraries as Gateways to an Enlightened World", in which, mobile libraries have really served at any time in anywhere to guarantee the life long study for everyone.

- Naturally, mobile libraries need to be improved in quality of service. The improvement may be a combination of reading and audio-visual services, promoting electronic books (CD-room), or mobile

libraries should be combined with other sectors to be more appealing and to build up a sustainable reading movement. Particularly, means of transport should be better equipped as other countries' mobile libraries

* Orientations for mobile library development in Vietnam in 2001-2010-2015 are feasible as:

- In February 2001, the Vietnamese Government promulgated the Ordinance on Librarianship. The Ordinance affirms the right to read books and newspapers of the population, the Government, authorities at all levels, branches in charge of activities for the maintenance and development of different forms of libraries. The first time ever, in the history of Vietnam Librarianship, the position and roles of Library have been correctly affirmed as it has already been:"...Library is responsible for preserving the national written heritage, collecting, possessing, providing the common use of the Library's collection to the population to publicize the knowledge, provide information, meet the demands for learning, study and entertainment of the population of different classes, contributing to the improvement of the population's knowledge, training human sources, fostering gifted people, contributing to the development of science, technology, economy, culture and the industrialization, modernization process of the country" (Ordinance on Vietnam Librarianship)

- The Government has approved 5 year support programme for library 2001-2005 in the cultural development programme

The consideration from IFLA, the support from the Vietnamese Government is bases to guarantee the development of Vietnam mobile libraries in the future.